

INTERNATIONAL CITY MANAGERS' ASSOCIATION
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Route To:

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THE ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT IN CITY GOVERNMENT

What is an administrative assistant? How is he selected? How can he best be introduced into the city hall? What kind of jobs can he do?

The Administrative Assistant. An administrative assistant as discussed here is a full-time employee who serves as an aid to the city manager (the mayor in noncouncil-manager cities). He usually has completed his graduate work, preferably in public administration. The assistant may come directly from a university with or without any previous public experience, may be promoted from another position within the city, or from another municipality. Not considered here are interns, trainees, or apprentices who are students assigned by a university to work and study in the city hall, often under the direction of the faculty, for a period usually not to exceed one year. These students either return to school to complete their academic requirements or are then available for full-time jobs. The assistant is not considered a trainee or apprentice although he usually looks upon his job as a step toward a city manager position.

The Manager's Job in Relation to the Assistant. Since the assistant may later become a city manager, the chief administrator may consider the assistant as an understudy and guide him accordingly. The manager can encourage a professional attitude on the part of the assistant toward his work and toward public employment in general. The job assignments should be developed according to the needs of the manager's office, the needs of the city as a whole, and also according to the abilities of the assistant. As the manager comes to know his assistant better, he may re-arrange his assignments so as to strengthen his weak points while using his strong points to meet the daily problems of the particular city.

How to Select Administrative Assistants. Assistants usually are selected on the basis of a review of their academic and work experience records, checking with previous employers, and a personal interview. Candidates are rarely given a written examination. The administrative assistant should be selected from as wide an area as possible. Local resident requirements, if any, ought to be waived. A city should establish only such standards as will raise the quality of applicants. Naturally, emphasis must be placed on personality, appearance, and other personal traits because the assistant at all times represents the manager's office. Since written examinations (if used) do not test for such qualities, a personal interview, as well as a character investigation, are necessary.

The minimum qualifications for medium-sized and large cities might well include graduation from college with training in public administration, business management, or engineering, and from three to five years' practical experience in public administration or private business of an appropriate character. Some cities prefer to specify a master's degree as the minimum educational requirement, foregoing any practical experience, on the theory that an assistant direct from the specialized school should with some in-service training fit into the city hall.

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Smaller cities, particularly, need not require the previous public or business experience demanded by the larger municipalities. One general rule might be followed--any candidate ought to be allowed to substitute an appropriate type of public experience for certain educational requirements so that the individual with a superior background in public employment will not be ruled out.

How to Introduce the Assistant into the City Hall. Before hiring an administrative assistant, the chief administrator should lay out a plan for introducing the assistant into the city hall. The assistant certainly ought to meet members of the council soon after his arrival. He also will meet the clerk, attorney, the department heads, other key personnel and the newspaper reporters. As part of his introduction, the assistant might visit each department and be introduced to the members of any boards and commissions in the city. He may even be assigned to one or two of the boards as secretary. He should participate in employees' social events and such activities as an employees' credit union. Part of his introduction should include a briefing on the attitudes of the newspapers, community leaders, and business groups toward the city hall. The assistant should be made aware of the social and political forces in the community, and the role played by each group on major issues.

How to Develop an Administrative Assistant. His introduction should include a clear understanding as to what his position is, how he is expected to conduct himself with relation to other city officials, the employees, the public, and the press. The assistant should be reminded that he is at all times the personal representative of the manager. He should be warned that his position does not entitle him to any special favors and that he should seek none.

The assistant ought to spend some time acquiring a brief education on the history of the city, its finances, personnel policies, the currently important projects, its plans for the future, and the political situation both within the city and in its relation to the state government. The assistant might well study the council proceedings for the past year, financial reports, auditor's statements, planning commission reports, state league publications, certain letters and correspondence as well as memoranda between departmental officials and the manager. During this brief period, the manager has an opportunity to find out what the assistant is like and to some extent his attitudes. If he meets other officials at lunch time, at meetings, and on inspection trips, the manager can observe his mannerisms, his methods of asking questions, whether he "sounds off", how he replies to questions, and his conduct with others generally.

The manager very soon should give his assistant specific assignments, perhaps one that may be done entirely within the manager's office. On the other hand, an early assignment might be the preparation of an annual report for the municipality. The assistant thus would have to visit every department, get pertinent operating and financial information, and thereby obtain very quickly an over-all picture of the municipality. The assistant can further broaden his over-all picture by enrolling in the course "The Technique of Municipal Administration," conducted by the Institute for Training in Municipal Administration, since he would study the city's organization and procedures in terms of the principles of city management.

On some jobs the manager will want to tell the assistant how the assignment should be approached. On others, the assistant may be given an assignment with little if any prior instruction with the results to be presented to the manager for his approval. Some managers prefer to have the assistant go on his own as soon as possible, thrusting responsibility upon the assistant as

fast as he can take it. A fine sense of timing and good judgment is required of the manager who must know when to add more responsibility without overloading his assistant.

The assistant should learn the important policies governing city operations as well as the basic working schedules of the different city departments, such as policemen's hours and firemen's hours, garbage collection schedules, budget and tax calendar, etc. An excellent method to speed up the accumulation of city information is to have him answer complaints and requests for information from the public. If done over the counter, this is best done along side an experienced employee for a time. Some coaching is needed to teach the assistant how to assist anyone making a request without committing the city to some undesirable or unnecessary action.

The Jobs an Assistant Can Do. An analysis of the jobs performed by 20 administrative assistants reveals that the most common tasks at the outset are handling complaints, running down information, taking care of routine correspondence, and acting as the manager's messenger. Later the assignments become more varied, and require greater exercise of personal judgment.

A manager cannot delegate his responsibilities but he can use assistants. Some aspects of planning, organization, direction, and fiscal and personnel management are assignable to general administrative assistants. For example, planning must be done at all levels of the administrative hierarchy but the assistant can gather and summarize the basic information so that the manager can review it easily and with a minimum of effort. Orders and rules necessary for the proper direction of the organization can be drafted by the assistant for the manager's review. He can also watch for impending difficulties in the administrative machinery. He may operate follow-up files to make certain that orders are executed and otherwise serve as the manager's eyes and ears. He may represent the manager at some meetings, take care of routine visitors, and sometimes substitute for the manager when he is not able to accept an invitation to speak. The assistant can shoulder a good share of the budget preparation job, compiling departmental requests, checking supporting data, and handling some of the preliminary negotiations. He can also perform some of the daily tasks of personnel administration, and advise the manager on the status of employee morale, as well as make suggestions for its improvement.

The jobs an assistant can perform depend primarily on his personal relations with the manager and secondarily on his personal relations with city officials and employees outside of the manager's office. In general, administrative assistants are expected to do almost any kind of work as long as it is not too specialized or too technical. It is quite likely that many assignments will have nothing whatever to do with his previous experience and will simply require that he use his own ingenuity.

The Kind of Person an Administrative Assistant Should Be. The administrative assistant should have a broad outlook on municipal problems and the ability to subordinate his own personality and preferences to those of others. He should not be a specialist in the narrower sense. His only "specialty" should be that of achieving balance and coordination among the many services and activities of the city administration. This does not mean, of course, that the assistant has no need of special skills. Some assistants may have special abilities to handle budget problems, others personnel problems, and still others planning problems. But the assistant also needs certain qualities of personality or manner. Because

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he has no authority of his own, he must be able and willing to keep himself in the background.

The assistant who tends to dominate conferences or to arrogate to himself the authority of the chief administrator soon creates friction within the organization. To put it broadly, the assistant should have negotiating ability rather than a highly developed capacity to command. He should be patient and persistent, be willing to remain in the background, and be loyal toward the policies and views of his superiors rather than insisting on his own conclusions or recommendations. Sometimes he must carry out policies which do not meet his approval. A successful relationship between the manager and his assistant depends on compatibility of their personalities as well as substantial agreement of philosophy and approach to city problems.

Some Things to Watch For. Every chief administrator knows that his assistants help determine how other people feel about his office. He may also be aware that some of the employees view the assistant with misgivings, since he appears to be the favorite of the top man. Care should be taken to forestall any "lording it over" the employees by the assistant in any way or in his becoming so over zealous in doing an assignment as to give an undue impression of urgency (and interfere with another's work) when the job is not that important. The manager may become a "hero" in the eyes of the assistant unless he is toned down a bit. Other officials may resent such perfection being attributed to the top man. On the other hand, the first blush of enthusiasm may quickly wane so that the assistant becomes overly-critical of the way the management job is being done. Furthermore the assistant may resent the tight rein over his actions particularly if the manager is reluctant or unable to delegate responsibility.

Some administrative assistants may be temporarily assigned to other departments or even fill a vacancy in a line or staff capacity. They may, however, quickly lose their character as general assistants unless brought back to the manager's office from time to time and restored to more general assignments. Assistants who are called personnel, finance, or planning assistants sometimes find it difficult to convince councils of other cities that they were general assistants, trained in over-all management and capable of handling the management job. After a couple of years as assistant he may feel that he is ready for a manager position. An agreement ought to be made at the beginning so that the assistant will remain for at least two years so that both the manager and the assistant can prepare ahead of time for the separation date.

Note: Officials of cities subscribing to MIS may obtain loan copies of job description of administrative assistant position.